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Michail, Domna and Christou, Anastasia ORCID logoORCID:  
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## **Eastern European Migrant Women in Greece: Intergenerational Cultural Knowledge Transfer and Adaptation in a Context of Crisis**

**Abstract.** This paper draws on a larger oral history project entitled ‘Gendered Histories of Resilience and Resistance: Eastern European Women’s Narratives of Mobility and Survival’, a narrative ethnography of Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Polish immigrant women living in Greece. The paper explores intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer and adaptation in a context of crisis with an analysis contextualised within the current crisis in Greece. We consider here the degree of uncertainty and the emotional challenges and constraints, but consider also the creativity and agency that participants display. Following on from that we aim to unravel the impact of ‘family and cultural values’ on migrants’ everyday lives in the diaspora.

**Key words:** migration, Eastern Europe, transnationalism, women, second generation, crisis

### **Introduction**

In recent years within interdisciplinary migration studies there has been growing interest in how migrants maintain ties to their countries of origin. There has been a suggestion that both immigrant incorporation and transnational practices are processes that inform each other mutually,<sup>1</sup> and it has been stated that for a number of reasons such as limited opportunity and lack of the sort of spaces that might nurture children’s ties to their communities of origin, transnational attachments are weaker in second generations than in the first.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the potential impact of growing up in transnational family and social environments provides individuals with the social contacts and skills to help introduce them to social networks which will be useful in both the host country and the country of origin. Besides, they grow up able to master ‘several cultural repertoires that they selectively deploy, if and when they want to, in response to the opportunities and challenges that confront them’.<sup>3</sup>

Previous research on the multiple ways in which the financial crisis has affected the economic and social development of Albanian transnational households in Greece suggests that the second generation does not share the same degree of connection with

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<sup>1</sup> Peggy Levitt / Kristen Lucken / Melissa Barnett, Beyond Home and Return: Negotiating Religious Identity across Time and Space through the Prism of the American Experience, *Mobilities* 6, No.4 (2011), 467-482.

<sup>2</sup> Cecilia Menjivar, Living in Two Worlds? Guatemalan-origin Children in the United States and Emerging Transnationalism, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, No. 3 (2010), 531-552, DOI: 10.1080/13691830220146590. [All internet references were accessed on 22 December 2015.]

<sup>3</sup> Levitt / Lucken / Barnett, Beyond Home and Return, 468. Cf. Peggy Levitt, Roots and Routes: Understanding the Lives of the Second Generation Transnationally, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35, No. 7 (2008), 1225-1242, 1226, DOI: 10.1080/136918309030006309.

its home country.<sup>4</sup> That same research has revealed that first- and second-generation Albanian immigrants exhibit different degrees of resilience in the face of the crisis, and that migrants apparently see themselves as going through a diversified process of shifting adaptation and identification.

Our current research reveals new elements which result essentially from the unemployment and lack of opportunities for social mobility created in Greece by the economic crisis. In contrast to suggestions from previous research on Albanian second-generation immigrants, we shall argue here that as the economic crisis deepens a number of second generation immigrants of other nationalities (Bulgarian, Romanian, and Polish) have taken advantage of their transnational networks and family ties to consider returning to their ancestral homelands in search of better opportunities. This is not a case of ‘home’ and ‘return’ but rather a type of transnational migration strategy with a bi-national orientation in both countries, the ancestral one which will become the host country, and the actual home country which is of course a host country to parents. Our study asks the following questions:

- How do immigrant women reflect on family and cultural values while shaping and performing migrant transnational lives and identities?
- How do they view the second generation’s identification and attachment to both home and host country, and how do they re-imagine their families?
- Can we properly speak of second-generation transnationalism? How has the economic crisis encouraged the orientation of the second generation to their homeland?

We addressed the above research questions through narrative accounts by first generation immigrant women from an ethnically diverse sample. We looked at how their transnational cultural and gendered understandings have shaped their children’s identification and attachment to home and host country, and how the women themselves envisage the second generation’s future in a transnational context. We considered the very specific coincidence of the current economic crisis and the insecurity it has brought with it. Our study is comparative; our sample has been selected from all four groups of immigrant ethnicities in Greece, and numbers of

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<sup>4</sup> Domna Michail, Social Development and Transnational Households: Resilience and Motivation for Albanian Immigrants in Greece in the Era of Economic Crisis’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 13, No. 2 (2013), 265-279.

subjects from each group were always in proportion to the total numbers of each in the country's population.

### Theory and Methods

Migration has come to be thought of as a gendered process<sup>5</sup> which both mediates and is mediated by inter-generational relations.<sup>6</sup> King and Vullnetari,<sup>7</sup> in their analysis of the intersection of gender and generation in Albanian migration, drew on Mahler and Pessar's *gendered geographies of power*, a framework for analysing people's social agency 'given their own initiative as well as their positioning within multiple hierarchies of power operative within and across many terrains'.<sup>8</sup> That framework accommodates and combines on the one hand migratory transnational practices affected by *social locations* (a person's position within power hierarchies that confer certain advantages or disadvantages), and on the other hand people's *substantive agency* as it is affected by individual characteristics like personal initiative, imagination, planning, and strategic thinking. While it is true that such power hierarchies are not constructed by the actors but rather that the actors are situated within the hierarchies, it remains essentially true that social agency reflects people's own resourcefulness and cognitive processes.

In introducing migrant women's agency into migratory theory some authors pay attention to the lived experiences of migrant women. They talk about 'migration as an escape from patriarchal structures (or 'gender regimes', for others<sup>9</sup>) as well as acknowledging that migration is also motivated by the search for an economic improvement for women's families.<sup>10</sup> Here, we extend women's agency by including another very important motivation for migration: 'personal reasons', by which we mean, 'falling in love' and marrying a Greek. That has been the case for almost half our participants who, it turned out, had simply followed their partners to Greece.

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<sup>5</sup> Sara Mahler / Patricia Pessar, *Gendered Geographies of Power: Analyzing Gender across Transnational Spaces*, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 7, No. 4 (2001), 441-459.

<sup>6</sup> Russell King / Mirela Dalipaj / Nicola Mai, *Gendering Migration and Remittances: Evidence from London and Northern Albania*, *Population, Space and Place* 12, No. 6 (2006), 409-434.

<sup>7</sup> Russell King / Julie Vullnetari, *The Intersections of Gender and Generation in Albanian Migration, Remittances and Transnational Care*. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 91, No. 1 (2009), 19-38.

<sup>8</sup> Mahler / Pessar, 447.

<sup>9</sup> Floya Anthias / Gabriella Lazaridis, *Gender and Migration in Southern Europe: Women in the Move*, Oxford, Berg 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Anthias / Lazaridis, *Gender and Migration in Southern Europe*, 7.

Transnationalism seems to encompass a wide range of activities that help immigrants maintain ties to their home country (by paying regular visits, establishing transnational businesses, building houses, sending remittances)<sup>11</sup>, making 'home and host society a single arena of social action'.<sup>12</sup> Kearney has proposed that 'transnational communities commonly refer to migrant communities spanning two nations',<sup>13</sup> and along the same lines Levitt in her study of the Miraflores in Boston has pointed out that 'both migrants and nonmigrants expressed a sense of consciously belonging to a group that spanned two settings'.<sup>14</sup> Changes to home communities are brought not only through economic remittances but social ones too. Levitt suggests that 'social remittances are the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities. The role that these resources play in promoting immigrant entrepreneurship, community and family formation, and political integration is widely acknowledged'.<sup>15</sup> Transnationalism in anthropology reflects a more general move 'away from bounded units of analysis and localised community studies'.<sup>16</sup>

This present study is set therefore in a transnational framework where geographic and cultural borders alike are crossed by immigrant women in the process of migration. We share Menjivar's view that 'since current notions of transnationalism, and perhaps the concept itself, have been based on the experiences of the parent generation, it will be fruitful to assess the long-term relevance of those experiences as the next generation reaches adulthood in the host country.'<sup>17</sup> Our analysis examines our participants through a comparative lens to view their experience of cultural, historical, and political contexts in the transnational social fields they inhabit. We shall then see what impact those experiences have had on how their own and their children's identities are negotiated and performed.

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<sup>11</sup> Domna Michail, Working Here, Investing Here and There: Present Economic Practices, Strategies of Social Inclusion and Future Plans for Return amongst Albanian Immigrants in a Greek-Albanian Border Town, *Journal of Southern European and Black Sea Studies* 9, No. 4 (2009), 539-554.

<sup>12</sup> Maxine Margolis, Transnationalism and Popular Culture: The Case of Brazilian Immigrants in the United States, *Journal of Popular Culture* 29 (1995), 29-41, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Kearney, The Local and the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995), 547-565, 559.

<sup>14</sup> Peggy Levitt, Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Culture Diffusion, *International Migration Review* 32, No. 4 (Winter 1998), 926-948, 929.

<sup>15</sup> Levitt, Social Remittances, 926.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Brettell, Theorizing Migration in Anthropology, in: Caroline Brettell / Frank Hollifield, eds, *Migration Theory*, London, Routledge 2008, 113-159, 121.

<sup>17</sup> Menjivar, *Living in Two Worlds?*, 532.

Mobility in its geographic and social manifestation is a gendered phenomenon.<sup>18</sup> It reveals elements of connection and disconnection, including stages of transit, transition, and transformation as well as the emotional and subjective dynamics they entail.<sup>19</sup> As migrant women who grew up experiencing the historical period of transition and transformation in their respective Eastern European countries our subjects embody an opportunity to extend the focus of our analytical lens. Through their reported experience we can view the unavoidable crossroads that major historical and emotional upheavals represent for participants who must negotiate domestic and private as well as social and public worlds in a crisis-ridden and changing Greece.

Our overall focus is to explore the parameters of resilience and empowerment in relation to gendered representations of migration and reaction to the economic crisis. Our analysis seeks to engage with the obstacles, both structural and everyday, encountered by migrant women especially in relation to their children as the second generation.

This multi-layered approach intersects lines of gender, ethnicity, and class to challenge economic accounts of migration. We intend to address those angles in our present study which is located in the Southern European context where writing on the gendering of migration has been rather scant. Based on life-history narrations, and by linking pre-migration to post-migration lives, our study involves a ‘transnational community’ approach spanning two generations.<sup>20</sup>

Our research was located in Greece and its participants are immigrant women of Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Polish origin, all of them with children. As a methodological note we should indicate that the data on which this paper is based were derived from ethnographic research at the scoping stage of a larger project which began in autumn 2013 and ended in autumn 2015. We have drawn on forty-one of a total of 200 in-depth interviews conducted by us with immigrant women whose children were born and grew up in Greece. Among them were sixteen Albanian, ten Bulgarian, nine Romanian, and six Polish women migrants, those numbers being

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<sup>18</sup> Anastasia Christou / Russell King, Gendering Diasporic Mobilities and Emotionalities in Greek-German Narratives of Home, Belonging and Return, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 20, No. 2 (2011), 283-315.

<sup>19</sup> Maruška Svašek, ed, *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*, New York, Oxford 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Russell King, *Geography and Migration Studies: Retrospect and Prospect*, *Population, Space and Place*. Published online in Wiley Online Library 2011, DOI: 10.1002/psp.685.

proportional to their national presence as immigrants in Greece. Their ages range from forty to sixty years, all have lived in Greece for more than ten years and all speak Greek fluently. Coming from different Eastern European countries, the participants presented different trajectories and life stories as well as different migrant experiences. Immigration patterns were different for each group of our participants depending on the socio-historical, as well as political and personal reasons that led the participants to emigrate.

The women were recruited and interviewed by the first author of this paper (from now on referred to as 'the interviewer'). They are from different places in Greece, including Athens, Thessaloniki, Kastoria, Florina, Aliveri, Larisa, Kozani, Chalkidiki, Volos, and Grevena, and were recruited either through acquaintances or through their migrant associations in Greece. Potential candidates were contacted first by telephone and informed of the nature and intended content of the research. If they agreed to participate, the interviewer then arranged an appointment for an interview in person at a place and time convenient to the participant. Most were attended at their homes, with the rest attended at their work, in public places or via Skype. The interviews were conducted in Greek, audio recorded and then transcribed and translated as part of the data analysis stage.

In the next sections we reflect on the four groups of migrant women by addressing the research questions explored in this paper and referred to in the previous section.

### **Albanian Women**

In Albania under socialism there was some attempt to ease gender inequality according to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, which 'provided a kind of ideological compass for all socialist societies, forming the base for what is known as "socialist gender order"'.<sup>21</sup> That doctrinal framework was specified in every socialist country due to the specific demographic structure<sup>22</sup> as well as the historical, geopolitical, and sociocultural context.<sup>23</sup> During that period patrilineality, male moral authority, and

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<sup>21</sup> Julie Vullnetari / Russell King, 'Washing men's feet': Gender, Care and Migration in Albania during and after Communism, *Gender, Place and Culture*, published online 12 March 2015, 1-18, 5, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1013447>.

<sup>22</sup> Riky Van Boeschoten, Transnational Mobility and the Renegotiation of Gender Identities: Albanian and Bulgarian Migrants in Greece, in: Hans Vermeulen et al, eds, *Migration in the Southern Balkans*, IMISCOE Research Series, 2015, 161-182, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Vullnetari / King, 'Washing men's feet', 5.

the formal subordination of women within the household had been the cornerstones of the Albanian family type, matching the 'Balkan' family type as described by Kaser.<sup>24</sup> Families and *fis* (extended families) functioned as autonomous productive units and the Communist Party considered them a threat that would hamper the social progress of the country.<sup>25</sup>

During the post-war industrialisation period almost half of all women were employed, something which happened without men undertaking any domestic work in return. Women consequently became overloaded with duties in and outside their homes, and although the state was supposed to provide care for children, it fell short both in quantity and quality. In many cases therefore, quite young children had to look after even younger ones. Progress in education, urbanisation, and marriage to urban men created limited prospects for a few women, but those in rural areas were still unable to prolong their education since that was seen as 'a battle against patriarchy'.<sup>26</sup> As Van Boeschoten notes, 'their personal lives had been embedded in a network of patriarchal relations in which they were supervised by their brothers, husbands, and mothers-in-law, as well as by the local community. (Their life stories were dominated...) by the conflicts generated in this setting between their own individual aspirations and the rules of the patriarchal extended family'.<sup>27</sup>

The period after socialism found most of our Albanian informants on their way to Greece, in almost all cases emigrating not on their own account but because they were following their husbands. Albanian emigration to Greece in the early 1990s was predominantly male-led, with men leaving first and women following on later. As soon as the men managed to settle and save some money, they returned to Albania either to marry or fetch their wives and children, hoping to start a new life in Greece. So it was that in the course of time Albanian immigration developed into permanent family settlement,<sup>28</sup> until now when Albanians currently make up 60% of the total immigrant population of Greece.

That was indeed the pattern for fifteen of our sixteen Albanian participants, only one of whom followed a different route. The exception was a woman who emigrated by herself, married a Greek man, but was divorced some years later. She was in fact

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Kaser, *Family and Kinship in the Balkans: A Declining Culture?*, *Ethnologia Balkanica* 1 (1997), 150-155.

<sup>25</sup> Vullnetari / King, 'Washing men's feet', 6.

<sup>26</sup> Vullnetari / King, 'Washing men's feet', 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Van Boeschoten, *Transnational Mobility and the Renegotiation of Gender Identities*, 173.

<sup>28</sup> Michail, *Working Here, Investing Here and There*.



the only divorced woman among our sample and confessed that she had married because of her need to feel secure and protected. Our participants repeatedly said that their children do not follow their ancestral traditions, do not want to return to Albania, and dream of their future either in Greece or some other Western country. However, the women seem to have faith in their children's decisions and show confidence in them, although naturally enough they would like to be as geographically close to them as possible. Most of them confided to us that even with the crisis that has made their stay in Greece so very difficult, they do not wish to return to Albania simply because they know their children would not be willing to go with them, and they do not want to leave them behind. These Albanian women emphasised family ties and expect their children to look after them in old age. Among Albanians there is a strong tradition that the youngest male child will care for his aging parents for, once married, daughters no longer belong to their patrilineal family. It is therefore customary for mothers to inculcate the sense of obligation in their male children by informing them of that duty. As 45-year-old Christina living in Thessaloniki explained:

'If we live away from our children then who will take care of us in old age? It's their responsibility to look after us, because we are their parents. Children should think about us. That's what family is about. That's why we do not want them to go elsewhere. If they go abroad then we cannot follow. But on the other hand we do not want them to go back to Albania. That's not only one but many steps backward.'

All the Albanian women described being a woman and mother in Albania as being a very demanding duty but mentioned that in general during the communist years they felt protected and supported. The communist state imposed 'state feminism' with high rates of female participation in public administration and the political arena, which brought significant improvements in family and marital relations for women. For example, the age gap between marriage partners narrowed, marriage for love rather than through family mediation became more usual, and women gained more opportunities to divorce.<sup>29</sup>

As immigrants in Greece, almost all the Albanian women exclusively entered the domestic labour sector, but never as live-in workers since all were married and living

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<sup>29</sup> King / Vullnetari, *The Intersections of Gender and Generation in Albanian Migration, Remittances and Transnational Care*, 23; Anastasia Christou / Domna Michail, *Migrating Motherhood and Gendering Exile: Eastern European Women Narrate Migrancy and Homing*, *Women's Studies International Forum* 52 (2015), 71-81.

with their families. In time and as they gained a substantial degree of empowerment in the host country, many took over the role of breadwinner. Indeed, during the years of the economic crisis especially, we began to see signs of actual disempowerment of men, which led to a sort of ‘patriarchal backlash’.<sup>30</sup>

For many women, economic independence is associated with freedom from social and physical restrictions, better educational opportunities for themselves and their children. For such women, the prospect of a more Westernised way of life seems to be vital, decisive indeed in their role as cultural transmitters within the family. Although Albanian emigration has been characterised by strongly gendered power relations where patriarchal values were very strongly projected, our participants’ narratives reflected resistance to traditional cultural norms. These women took a position critical of gendered family roles, and re-imagined their future in a more ‘advanced’ or ‘developed’ European context. According to Michaela, a 43-year-old from Kastoria:

‘We [*meaning Albanian women*] are happier in Greece despite the crisis. We are free to work, we have our own money, we meet people, and our life is more interesting. Our children are happier here as well. And we feel that, with the education they get, there will be a better future for them. It was difficult during the first years but now our children are like Greeks. They do not want to go back to Albania. But we, the women, also don’t want to go back. Now that we have learned to live here, Albania will be difficult for us. There is no life for women there and our children will not have the same opportunities.’

All the same, the Albanian women emphasised their own emotional ties with their country of origin. They all maintain transnational personal relations with relatives ‘back home’ and while recognising that their children do not feel the same, the women are uncomfortable at seeing them distancing themselves from their ancestral homeland, both physically and emotionally. Despite their elders’ extensive efforts to maintain strong ties with Albania and their relatives there, and to reinforce networks, the young people dream of a life in Greece or elsewhere. Here is Dora, a 53-year-old Albanian mother from Thessaloniki:

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<sup>30</sup> Boeschoten, *Transnational Mobility and the Renegotiation of Gender Identities*, 162.

‘We tried hard so that they don’t forget their roots, and my husband even built a house in Tirana for them in case they wanted to live there. But our children do not feel the same nostalgia for Albania that we do. They don’t feel connected to our land.’

And Eleni a 42-year-old mother from Thessaloniki confesses:

‘I have anxieties about my children because they don’t want to go to their mother country, they don’t like it at all, they don’t want to see anyone; their relatives are there but they don’t see them as relatives.’

Expectations and anxiety about their children’s future have intensified during the years of the crisis. There is now widespread poverty in large segments of the Greek population, resulting in heightened resentment towards immigrants. The situation has hit those immigrants who lost their jobs during the crisis. Loss of employment is automatically linked to an individual’s residence permit, which will be revoked for the unemployed. As a result of that, large numbers of immigrants have remained in Greece illegally having formed strong family, cultural, and financial links in the host country, while others, especially Albanians, return to Albania risking their ‘good name’ as successful migrants to Greece.<sup>31</sup>

Our participants are among those who still work legally in the host country but still they are in a sort of limbo, unable yet to decide whether it is better to stay in Greece, return to Albania, or perhaps re-migrate. Those who decide to return must leave their adult children behind, since second generation migrants indeed seem unwilling to follow their parents to their ancestral homeland. For the generation of women we interviewed the economic crisis and their lack of Greek citizenship are factors pushing them strongly to re-migrate either to another European country or elsewhere overseas.

The Albanian women fear that the fairly secure living conditions they have worked so hard to build in Greece over the last almost twenty years are threatened or have been completely overturned, while their children dream of a life in another country because Greece refuses them a residence permit if they are not legally

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<sup>31</sup> Domna Michail / Ilias Bantekas, Μετανάστευση/κινητικότητα και η ιδιότητα του πολίτη: μια προσέγγιση μέσα από την ανθρωπολογία και το διεθνές δίκαιο (Migration/Mobility and Citizenship: an Anthropological and International Law Approach), in: Domna Michail / Anastasia Christou, eds, Inter-European Migration/Mobility at the Era of the Economic Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach, Thessaloniki, 2015.

employed. As Jina, a 51-year-old woman from the island of Evoia says:

‘Both my sons are graduates from the Polytechnic University, where they earned distinctions. One has also done a Master’s degree. But neither can find a job and the state does not give them a residence permit. My children will be forced to leave the country where they were born and grown up. It is irrational for Greece to push them out, especially as they were educated for free in Greece. Now, one is looking to go to America<sup>32</sup>. The other one is thinking of pursuing postgraduate studies in order to get a student’s residence permit. He hopes the law will change soon.’

The Albanian migration pattern in Greece is characterised by long-term family settlement, intense transnational relations, and strong family ties for the first generation. Women seem very close to their children and are very supportive of their decisions whether they like them or not. Mothers trust their children’s judgment and understand that on the one hand the ‘home country’ is not attractive to them while on the other hand the ‘host country’ too has now become unattractive as a result of the crisis. The transnational stance of the second generation is therefore a more complex thing than a ‘game’ of attachment to the host country that leads to detachment from the sending country, and *vice versa*.<sup>33</sup> This particular relationship of the second generation with space and locality has rarely been studied.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, as we shall see, patterns of migration among immigrant Bulgarian, Romanian, and Polish women are different as a result of their different life trajectories and migration history.

### **Bulgarian Women**

The different characteristics of the migrations patterns of the Bulgarian women are mostly a consequence of the history of gender and power relations that developed first during the socialist period, and then after the end of that regime. Socialism in Bulgaria attempted to fight patriarchy by overriding customary law. Legislation was introduced for equality between men and women ‘establishing a new type of family, based on

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<sup>32</sup> Before this article was written and almost two years after the interview was conducted, this woman’s elder son had left for the USA after being awarded a graduate assistantship for PhD studies; her youngest son is studying for a PhD in Greece so that he can extend his legal stay there.

<sup>33</sup> Ruben Gowricharn, Changing Forms of Transnationalism, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, No. 9 (2009), 1619-1638, 1634.

<sup>34</sup> Zana Vathi, Transnational Orientation, Cosmopolitanism and Integration among Albanian-Origin Teenagers in Tuscany, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, No. 6 (2013), 903-919, 908, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2013.765653.

love and partnership instead of hierarchical relations between the sexes'.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, urbanisation increased and access to education was extended to girls as well as boys. Women gained access to employment—in fact it became practically obligatory for them—and the laws governing divorce and abortion were liberalised. Kaser argues that as a result of those policies there was a decline in patrilineality and the honour complex related to it, although instead of being abolished the established patriarchy was transformed into a sort of 'state patriarchy'.<sup>36</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s the role of women as the reproducers of the nation was emphasised by this 'parent state' and previous liberal policies on abortion and divorce were restricted and pro-natalist policies introduced.<sup>37</sup> Women were protected and the notion of them as mothers was zealously fostered by the socialist state in Bulgaria, with women receiving maternity leave from work for two-years after the birth of each child. Children themselves were provided with free medical and dental care until the age of fifteen, while nursery schools were properly organised to provide the best care for children so that women could work.

For their part, our Bulgarian participants claimed that actually under socialism women were overloaded with work both in and outside the home. They had far more responsibilities than did men, but at the same time the women acknowledged that they were free to express their opinions both within the family and in wider society. They stated that these were the main reasons why divorce was very common during socialism, since women were able to support themselves and their children and because they were supported by the state. They made the further point that those circumstances meant that after socialism they were suddenly able to emigrate in search of better economic opportunities.

In the post-communist era there has been a turn to traditionalisation in Bulgaria with women pushed 'back home' and out of the public sphere. Each of our informants, when asked why they chose to emigrate, referred to the post-communist era when most women lost their jobs. To our question about how they experienced the end of communism, most of the interviewees claimed that for them, when they lost

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<sup>35</sup> Van Boeschoten, *Transnational Mobility and the Renegotiation of Gender Identities*, 164.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Kaser, *Patriarchy after Patriarchy: Gender Relations in Turkey and the Balkans, 1500-2000*, Vienna 2008, 184.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton 1996, Chapter 3, 61-82.

state protection and the security they had enjoyed as working women and mothers under communism, it meant the beginning of poverty and dispersal.

So then; the history of gender and power relations in Bulgaria, presented only very briefly here, partly explains the rough pattern of the migration of the Bulgarian women to Greece. In Albania, migration flows followed the collapse of communism, while in Bulgaria there had been some degree of population mobility even before the 1990s. Nevertheless, migration flows in both countries were shaped primarily by geographical proximity in a transnational context of mobility between Greece and the two aforementioned countries: Bulgaria and Albania.<sup>38</sup> All the same, in terms of timing, intensity, gender, and age composition they are different. Albanian emigration to Greece during the first years after the collapse of communism could be characterised as a ‘mass exodus’ of young men which in time developed into ‘family settlement migration’, while in Bulgaria, as the life stories recorded here show,<sup>39</sup> people first tried to make a living in their own country during the first years of transition; emigration flows started only much later.

Bulgarian migration to Greece could be characterised as ‘liquid migration’<sup>40</sup> where individualised transnational migration patterns emerge with some men but mostly women, both young and older and without family responsibilities, trying their luck on their own in another country. These transnational migrants are usually long-term residents in the host country while they maintain strong bi-national orientation in both home and host countries. They keep their options open, as it were, for they can of course choose to stay or return. Bulgarian immigrants constitute only about 5-6% of the total immigrant population in Greece.

Emigration by lone among Bulgarian women is very common even for women of middle age, even though a number of them might marry Greeks, whether before or after emigration. Middle aged emigrants had had acute economic problems to deal with, and emigration had been the only solution. Those women worked as live-in domestic servants in Greek families, working as cleaners, baby-sitters or, especially in

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<sup>38</sup> Panos Hatziprokopiou / Eugenia Markova, Labour Migration and other Forms of Mobility between Bulgaria and Greece: The Evolution of a Cross-Border Migration System, in: Migration in the Southern Balkans, IMISCOE Research Series 2015, 185, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-13719-3\_10.

<sup>39</sup> Similarly to what Van Boeschoten (2015) has observed in her study on transnational mobilities and renegotiation of gender identities among Albanian and Bulgarian immigrants in Greece.

<sup>40</sup> Godfried Engbersen, et al, On the Differential Attachments of Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe: A Typology of Labour Migration, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, No. 6 (2013), 959-981, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.765663>.

the Northern Greek areas bordering Bulgaria, as unskilled agricultural workers. Younger women found work in the service sector at restaurants and bars as waitresses, cleaners, or cooks. Others work in the entertainment sector—which includes sex work.<sup>41</sup> All the women used their networks in both Greece and Bulgaria to gather information and prepare themselves for emigration although such preparation only rarely included learning the Greek language. They tried to maintain transnational ties because migration for them would put them in what they expected would be a temporary situation, for they all hoped to return ‘after a few years’, although none of them had had a definite number in mind.

Seven of our sample emigrated alone or together with other women of the same age. Five of them, most divorced and already in their late forties, had left their children behind to be looked after by grandparents. All were sending remittances, but at the same time were saving money for when they hoped to return, in their own old age. Two women from our sample emigrated in their twenties with Greek partners whom they had met in Bulgaria, while one was with her Bulgarian husband and her children. All ten are fairly well educated, four of them being university graduates (one with an MA and a PhD), while two had studied at technical institutions and four had completed secondary education. Four women said that, despite their qualifications, they had not managed to enjoy a successful professional career, partly because of Greek bureaucracy but partly too for personal reasons.

The majority of our Bulgarian participants (seven of the ten) had left their children in Bulgaria because they considered that would be best for the children. Furthermore, it would have been impossible for them to work as live-ins if they had had their children with them. Because of that of course, those women have been parted from their children and have therefore suffered for it. As Lucy, a 55-year-old divorced woman who emigrated on her own sixteen years ago and now lives in Athens, told us:

‘It was so hard for me to be separated from my children although they were quite grown up. I woke-up and went to bed with them always in my thoughts. I missed them a lot and was worried about them. There was no chance for me to have them here because I was all alone. My husband left me when my elder child was sixteen and my youngest twelve. He

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<sup>41</sup> Aliko Angelidou, Migrations in the “Neighborhood”: Negotiations of Identities and Representations about “Greece” and “Europe” among Bulgarian Migrants in Athens, *Balkanologie* XI, No. 1-2 (2008), <http://balkanologie.revues.org/1152>.

disappeared and never helped us with anything. My daughter emigrated to Austria; my son might come here to Greece. That option's open...'

Since our participants are all over 40, almost all of them had grown-up children at the time of the interview. Those who had left their children in Bulgaria explained that the current economic crisis in Greece is deterring young Bulgarians from emigrating to Greece. Even the three women from our sample whose children live in Greece, are busily trying to reinforce relations with relatives and friends in Bulgaria and to get their children to consider the possibility of going back to Bulgaria to look for better professional opportunities. In fact all our Bulgarian participants whose children are in Greece told us that they speak Bulgarian to them because they want them to be ready for a return to their ancestral homeland. Besides, they send them to the Bulgarian Sunday School where they are taught in both Bulgarian and Greek. The number of pupils at that school fluctuates in line with the status and conditions of Bulgarian migrants in Greece, in relation to Bulgaria's EU accession, and because of the current economic crisis in Greece. That last condition has resulted in increased numbers of pupils at the Sunday School because parents think that if things take a turn for the worse, they might well return to Bulgaria.<sup>42</sup> Jenny is a 60-year-old woman from Athens with two children living in Greece and three still in Bulgaria. She told us:

'Of course I speak only Bulgarian with my children, they also go to the Bulgarian Sunday School. My children will return. I want it and my children want it too. I came here to work because my husband is ill. I want to go back. Besides, they (*her two children living in Greece with her*) have not decided to stay in Greece forever. They will work here for a few years and then they will go back. My other three children live in Bulgaria. We have our people there to help us. We hope, after a few years, things will be better in Bulgaria. That there will be jobs and our children will be able to work there.'

On the other hand, Eleana, a 58-year-old interviewee living in Thessaloniki, divorced from her Greek husband and with an only child, explained that she tries to keep options open for her son in Bulgaria in case things get worse in Greece in the future. But he is sceptical:

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<sup>42</sup> Hatziprokopiou / Markova, *Labour Migration and other Forms of Mobility*, 199.



‘We go to Bulgaria together quite often to see our relatives but he feels nothing there...I tell him: ‘Look, if Greece doesn’t go well, we’ll go to Bulgaria’, and he replies: ‘Who will go? *You* not me! *You* are Bulgarian!’’

Transnational family arrangements might take various forms with Bulgarian immigrant mothers developing attachments to both countries, so giving their children the opportunity to lead transnational lives too and to become involved in transnational professional activities. Many mothers expressed a wish that the family should be reunited in their home country; nevertheless, many confess that their children have a more ‘cosmopolitan’ outlook and enjoy extensive mobility to many places and environments<sup>43</sup> since in both Greece and Bulgaria job opportunities remain limited.

### **Romanian Women**

Similarly to the Bulgarian pattern of emigration to Greece, Romanian migration is characterised mainly by individual short-term emigration by childless men and women for seasonal work. During the 1970s and 1980s President Ceausescu imposed harsh austerity measures in order to repay Romania’s debts. The measures included major cuts to domestic consumption and public welfare at large.<sup>44</sup> The flow of emigration from Romania to Greece (6% of the total flow) began gradually after the fall of socialism in 1989 and continued all through the second post-socialist decade. Although it has continued to be in dribs and drabs, emigration has nevertheless been one of the key strategies ‘to survive the negative consequences of such a dramatic restructuring’.<sup>45</sup>

Until 2007 there were only 17,546 Romanian immigrants legally settled in Greece, but there were at least as many undocumented ones. Romania acceded to the European Union in 2007, and by 2009 when Romanians no longer needed residence permits the number of Romanian immigrants in possession of such permits increased to 19,349, in other words 2.88% of the total immigrant population. With the large number still undocumented they make up the fourth largest immigrant nationality in

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<sup>43</sup> Bronislaw Szersynski / John Urry, *Visuality, Mobility and the Cosmopolitan: Inhabiting the World from Afar* 57, No. 1 (2006), 113-131, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-4446.2006.00096.x.

<sup>44</sup> Bruno Meeus, *Welfare through Migrant Work: What if the Romanian ‘Safety Valve’ Closes?*, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 13, No. 2 (2013), 175-194, 177, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2013.802177>.

<sup>45</sup> Meeus, *Welfare through Migrant Work*, 186.

Greece.<sup>46</sup>

Under communism in Romania and while Ceausescu held power, women were denied reproductive rights through a pro-natalist programme which denied them the right to abortion. Severe rationing in the 1980s caused enormous difficulties for women simply in obtaining the food to raise their children as daily life became a struggle for survival. On the other hand, part of state welfare policy was to offer women and families guaranteed work and subsidised holidays, while women were allowed equal participation in the labour force, which meant that they were ‘liberated’ from the domestic sphere. After the Revolution and during the 1990s, unemployment rose as factories closed, and that too affected women more than men, with many women effectively forced into early retirement. What is worth noting is the apparently rather contradictory position of many of our participants. All of them, despite referring to the ‘repressive regime of Communism’ which imposed harsh pro-natalist policies on women and led to more perinatal deaths of mothers and orphans, nevertheless emphasised that they have good memories of childhood and adolescence in Communist Romania. They said they felt secure and protected and suggested that many Romanians hold that people lived better under Communism because in those days everyone had a job. After the fall of communism and the transition to a democratic system and free market economy, rising inflation and unemployment made consumer goods unaffordable for many while a number of benefits which had been guaranteed to women were withdrawn. Rebecca, a successful 51-year-old interpreter living in Athens recalls:

‘Most people feel nostalgia for that period because they forget all the bad things and remember only the good ones: people had secure jobs, good chances to study with free accommodation in student halls; as a student you didn’t need to work during your studies. And later one could get a job immediately. There were no such worries that’s why most of the young people got married and had babies before finishing their University studies. They knew that they would have a job.’

The considerably gendered demand for domestic work and elderly care in Greece secured employment opportunities for women. Our sample consisted of nine

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<sup>46</sup> Daria Lazarescu, Ρουμάνικη Μετανάστευση στην Ελλάδα: Άτυπα μεταναστευτικά δίκτυα, (Romanian Migration to Greece: Informal Migration Networks), ELIAMEP, <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/ro-gr.pdf>.

Romanian women who all married Greeks. Six of them met their husbands in Romania during their studies and three in Greece, where they first arrived either on their own or with a close friend or relative. Six of them are University graduates (two doctors, two teachers, one interpreter and one journalist), three have completed secondary education. Two decided after the fall of socialism to emigrate on their own as soon as they finished their studies, while the other seven completed their studies first before going to Greece to follow their Greek partners, some of whom had been fellow students on the same courses at university in Romania. Six built successful careers in Greece, two worked in a family business. Only one was unemployed at the time of interview.

Our Romanian participants claimed that in Romania they had felt neither inferior nor oppressed either in public or at home; they enjoyed the respect of men and under the socialist state were supported equally with men at both university and work. They said that the status of motherhood was particularly protected and women were assisted in their roles as professionals and mothers through a number of measures like lengthy maternity leave after childbirth, nurseries, and all-day schools to care for their children during working hours. The women emphasised the feeling of security that they enjoyed as women and mothers and pointed out that, under socialism there was hardly any criminality. We realise that communism was meaningful for some women who overlooked the repressive aspects of life under state Socialism while reflecting on how they lived as children and adolescents.

‘Under communism we enjoyed absolute equality with men’, claimed Monica, a 55-year-old woman living in Athens. Similarly, others assured us, ‘Women had control over the house’; ‘they all worked’; ‘women were also involved in politics’; ‘men treated women with respect, a lot of respect, which I really miss in Greece’; ‘I did not experience violence for being a woman’; ‘mothers were protected and supported by the state, abortion was prohibited and women were obliged to give birth in hospital not at home - otherwise the police arrested your husband and put him in prison ... the state wanted to have control over births’.

Most of the women told us they had never thought of emigrating, but for the majority of them the reasons were personal. Marrying a foreigner under Communism was difficult. They told us that they had to apply to the state for permission to marry and then they had to leave the country. In some cases permission was given only after a number of years. Our participants all said that they had adapted to the Greek way of

life quite easily. 'I don't think we're much different', said Nora, a 53-year-old doctor living in Athens 'The Romanians always loved Greece and the Greeks,' she added.

They all visit Romania quite often (2-5 times a year). Two of them are involved in transnational businesses and spend long periods in Romania although they confess that they prefer their life in Greece. They point out that their marriages to Greeks have made integration much easier and they are well settled in the host country which they now feel is their own. They are all mothers whose children were born in Greece, but they almost always speak only Romanian to their children. Certainly for the children born to them in their early years in Greece Romanian was easier since none of their mothers could yet speak fluent Greek; then they spoke both languages almost equally to their children born in later years. Besides, all the women used to send their children to their parents in Romania for the summer holidays to maintain strong family ties and make sure that they practised their Romanian. Here is Rebecca from Athens again:

'My child tasted a little bit of everything [...] because I always used to send her to Romania [...] she had a great time there [...] she had her grandparents' and relatives' love and care.'

All our participants emphasised to us that they do not trust the educational system in Greece. Four of the women sent their children to school in Romania. Genovefa, a 59-year-old woman living in Thessaloniki explained:

'My daughter learned Greek at school and Romanian with me at home. I taught her to read and write Romanian because speaking it is not enough. Then when she learned English, she realised how useful the Romanian language was. I did not let her take entry exams here in Greece. I told her: "you will go directly to Romania, the Universities there are strict. If you fail one exam twice, then you have to repeat the whole year". That's why I got her in there, because I trust the Romanian Universities, they are still good [...] because nobody knows what will happen tomorrow [...]. I enrolled her straight in the Medical School of Bucharest. She has a right to that because she has dual citizenship. She took her exams in Romanian and the professors asked her: "where did you learn such good Romanian?" She said "My mother taught me"; and I liked that! I felt very proud!

During the economic crisis some women encouraged their children to consider the possibility of going back to Romania, and some have remained there after their studies. To our question whether she would consider going back, 45-year-old Markela from Thessaloniki replied:

‘Of course! I could return anytime! My daughter is already there and is working. Unfortunately, in Greece she couldn’t find a job relevant to her studies and skills. There [Romania] she found a job immediately after graduation.’

Meanwhile Nona explains that her son is happy with his studies in Bucharest:

‘My son, the elder one, is in his sixth year of studies in Romania, in Bucharest. With this system here he didn’t manage to pass the entry examinations and now he says: ‘it was my good luck that I didn’t pass’ [...] After his studies he won’t come back nor will he stay in Romania. He’s thinking of going somewhere else where he’d have good prospects. For my son as well as for many other young people I know, Greece will be a holiday destination. His friends who are still here tell him: “Greece will be only for holidays, a country which is sold at a bargain price to foreigners!”.’

Rebecca also suggests that her son could spend all his school summer holidays in Romania because she worked hard. As a result he developed strong ties with the people and country and speaks fluent Romanian, although with a Greek accent! He also learned the history of the country from his grandfather who is a historian:

‘He learned the history of Romania; his grandfather made sure of that. He enjoys being there and is connected somehow. He also has dual citizenship, Greek and Romanian. This is not an obstacle but can offer him more chances. He doesn’t feel inferior. He says that he is 70% Greek and 30% Romanian. He says to me: “I’m 50% Greek because of my descent plus 20% because I was educated here”.’

Our sample of Romanian women maintain generally strong ties with their home country and as a nationality they are very distinct. Their level of education sets them apart, as do the successful careers in Greece for most of them, their confidence and agency but also how they have worked to transmit their cultural values to their children, notably teaching them the Romanian language. They see their children as being identified with both the ‘host’ and the ‘home’ country, although acknowledging that most of their children see their futures outside Greece. The women have nevertheless ‘invested’ heavily in their children’s ‘home’ ties and still make efforts to shape their children’s transnational identities. Theirs is therefore a pragmatic reaction to the current economic crisis in their host country.

## Polish Women

The Poles in Greece are an interesting immigrant group for they appear to be semi-autonomous as a community, having developed their own institutions and networks to cater for their needs, without developing either the attitudes or reality of an ethnic enclave.<sup>47</sup> The Polish community is one of the oldest immigrant communities in Greece and one of the best organised. Most importantly, the Poles are the only immigrant group from the Eastern Bloc who have been present in Greece since before 1989. And this despite the distance between both countries, and the lack of historical, cultural, religious, economic, or any other kind of ties between them.<sup>48</sup>

The first Poles immigrated to Greece seeking asylum or at least visas after the imposition of martial law in 1981. Since the fall of Communism and the opening of borders in 1989, emigration from localities hit by economic decline has been a favourite livelihood strategy.<sup>49</sup> Poles have been moving around as economic migrants, with or without tourist visas, usually staying on after the expiration of their residence permit. Our participants often referred to the fact that the transition to a market economy has resulted in a contraction of employment opportunities.

Since Poland's official accession to the European Union in 2004 migration has been much easier. At first, it was mostly younger people, men and women, who responded to the opportunity to emigrate, and it appears that many did so individually alongside the families who left. According to the 2001 census there were about 13,000 Poles in Greece, but later their number was estimated at about 20,000,<sup>50</sup> although after five years of economic crisis it had decreased to about 12,000.<sup>51</sup> The majority of Poles live in Athens and the wider region of Attica. They are a well-organised community with their own schools, church, and local organisations.

Many Poles entered the country regularly and according to our participants were quite mobile within the country as they looked for seasonal work in agriculture, tourism, catering, construction, and domestic service. For most of them, the decision to migrate to Greece was prompted less by poverty than by a wish to improve their

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<sup>47</sup> Anastasia Christou, Agency, Networks and Policy: The Case of Poles in Greece, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 6, No. 3 (2008), 312-325, 313, DOI: 10.1080/15362940802371051.

<sup>48</sup> Michaela Marouf, Polish Migration in Greece. *IDEA, Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-Based Society*, European Commission 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Ann White, Young People and Migration from Contemporary Poland, *Journal of Youth Studies* 13, No. 5 (October 2010), 565-580, 566, DOI:1080/13676261.2010.487520.

<sup>50</sup> Michaela Marouf, Polish Migration in Greece.

<sup>51</sup> InsideoutBorders, 20 November 2014, <http://insideoutborders.com/2014/11/20/insideathens9-out-of-10-poles-have-gone-due-to-financial-crisis/>.

quality of life (*lifestyle migration*), or simply to experience life abroad, although some wished to provide better opportunities for their children. Anna, a 40-year-old teacher living in Thessaloniki, put it very clearly:

‘I came [to Greece] for just one thing: Kavafis [*the well-known Greek poet*]. I came because Philosophy was born in this country and I wanted to meet its people and its history. Then I found a job, met my husband—and stayed here.’

Our sample included six women from Poland, all married to Greeks. All except one met their husbands after they had come to Greece, three while there on holiday and the other two when they were in Greece for seasonal work. The remaining one of our interviewees met her husband in Poland and left after taking her medical degree. All the women’s life stories revealed reasons other than economic for their emigration, ranging from simple romantic relationships or a wish to travel and enjoy new experiences among different people, to unemployment and difficulty in supporting their families. Two of the sample were already in employment in Poland before they came to Greece, whereas in Greece now, three are teaching in the Polish schools (two in Athens and one in Thessaloniki). This is how Liza put it; she is a 48-year-old teacher from Thessaloniki:

‘What I most liked about Greece was coming here for holidays and seeing your way of living. I liked the climate, the sun ... I liked many things.’

And Flora, 50-years old and another teacher, this time from Larissa:

‘I wouldn’t have come to live here if I hadn’t met my husband. I had a good life back in Poland...I had my studies, my job, I was doing a PhD. I had no complaints; I was quite happy. I came to Greece on holiday and...that’s how it happened!’

Our participants claimed that women in Poland were in work, independent and dynamic during socialism and have remained so since. They consider Greek society to be patriarchal and, at the time of their arrival, very much backward in comparison to Polish society.

Two of our participants are currently teaching in Polish schools in Greece. They both claim that parents who send their children to such schools are preparing them for

returning to Poland. Anna, 40 and teaching at the Polish school in Athens, feels that preparing the children to be able to make a successful return to Poland undermines their present situation in Greece:

‘I am not sure whether it’s good for those children who come to our school if they finally stay in Greece, because they live in a parallel world, like another planet. In reality they live neither in Poland nor in Greece because it’s only a small piece of Poland here; they come from Polish homes, they have Polish friends, they socialise with Polish children on the school bus and at school, they speak Polish; they live as if they were in Poland but they’re not in Poland. In Greece they don’t feel right. We, the teachers, try hard to give a good example, to show that you don’t stop being a Pole if you speak Greek, you don’t stop being a Pole if you have Greek friends.’

### **Concluding Remarks**

Immigrant women in their role as mothers shape and perform migrant transnational lives and identities through dynamically unfolding and changing practices, reflecting family and ethnic or cultural values. Their practices seem to be responsive to their current situation and so are an amalgamation of past and present social geographies. A considerable number of our sample are preparing their children for bi-national or transnational mobility intended to enhance their prospects, perhaps of moving on again elsewhere in the world. The majority of Albanian women orient their children to either Greece or other Western destinations, and trust their children’s choices and compromises with the belief that the economic crisis demands new survival strategies. A number of the Bulgarian women who spoke to us said that they have dreams of being reunited with their children and grandchildren back in Bulgaria, since the majority of them had been lone emigrants. Romanian women, who had followed a pattern of family migration, still maintain strong ties with their home country and were working hard to transmit their cultural values and language competence to their children. Many among them encourage their children to attend university in Romania because they have both faith in the educational system there and hope for Romania’s future development. Finally, among the Polish women we saw that the option of returning remains open for them as well their children. They invest in their children’s education in Polish schools, although it seems that must put their children’s full and fair integration in the Greek society at risk.



In terms of their state of migrancy, some of the women claimed that they would always feel like foreigners in Greece. In the case of 'mixed family' backgrounds, there were instances where women claimed that their spouse's Greek family had never accepted them and that they found that particularly disappointing. Others felt that the wider community accepted them more easily than had their own host family. We also observed an 'us-and-them' dichotomy in mothering practices with an ethnic and national element. That was something we saw from a comparative perspective when the participants stated unambiguously that they were 'not like Greek mothers', by which they were emphasising an ethnic element in the way they went about being mothers.